The Obama Administration: Setting Up a Government

The Leadership Style of Barack Obama: An Early Assessment

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Abstract

This article presents a highly distilled account of the formative experiences and political rise of Barack Obama. It draws on the sources that were available at the time of his inauguration. The article concludes by examining Obama’s leadership qualities in the realms of public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence. The article went into production one month after Obama entered the White House.

KEYWORDS: presidential leadership, Barack Obama

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Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States on January 20, 2009. He is the first African American to achieve this position. Obama ran a nearly flawless presidential campaign, won a decisive electoral victory, and presided over an impressively run transition to the presidency. Few presidents have faced such urgent challenges upon taking office, including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an economy in deep recession, and a host of pressing domestic problems.

At the time this article went to press, Obama had just completed his first month in the White House, but there is much to be learned from his formative experiences and pre-presidential political career. During that first month there had been stumbles, particularly in the form of cabinet nominees who had to step down because of tax problems. But Congress had enacted Obama's $787 million economic stimulus program, and his public approval level was impressively high.

In this article, as in my *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush*, I review the personal development and political career of my protagonist and assess his strengths and weaknesses as chief executive in terms of his strengths and weaknesses in the realms of public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.1

A Complicated Upbringing

Barack Hussein Obama, Jr., was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961. He is the son of Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., a black African from Kenya, and Ann Dunham, a white American from Kansas. Obama’s parents separated when he was two and were later divorced. His only memories of his father (who died in 1982) are from a brief meeting when he was ten and occasional perfunctory correspondence. Obama is distinctive not only because he is biracial, but also because religion played virtually no part in his childhood. His mother was an agnostic humanist, and the grandparents who helped raise him were not religious.

Obama’s mother married an Indonesian man in 1967 and moved with her son to Jakarta, where he attended local schools in which Indonesian was the language of instruction. In 1971, he returned to Hawaii, where he lived with his grandparents and attended the academically rigorous Punahou School from fifth grade through his graduation from high school in 1979. He went on to study at Occidental College in Los Angeles for two years and then transferred to Columbia

University in New York, from which he graduated in 1983 with a major in political science.

On the surface, the young Obama stood out for his intelligence, articulateness, and poise. Inwardly, he was troubled about the inconsistency between his African American identity and the remoteness from the life experience of most American blacks that resulted from being brought up in a white family. As he later put it, “I was attempting to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant.”

During his coming-of-age years, Obama indulged in drugs and alcohol, but he also immersed himself in writings on philosophy, religion, and the African-American experience. His reading included Saint Augustine, Nietzsche, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and works on the civil rights movement.

As his graduation from Columbia approached, Obama decided that he wanted to become a community organizer. “There wasn’t much detail in the idea,” he recalled:

> When classmates in college asked me just what it was that a community organizer did, I couldn’t answer directly. Instead, I’d pronounce on the need for change. Change in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds. Change in the Congress, compliant and corrupt. Change in the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. Change won’t come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots.

Obama sent his résumé to every civil rights organization and progressive black politician he could think of, but there were no takers. He decided to take a more conventional job to pay off his student loans and found an editorial position with a firm that provided information about markets to companies with overseas operations. After a year, he resigned to devote himself to seeking a community organizing position. In 1985, Obama joined the staff of a church-based organization in Chicago which put him in charge of establishing job training and tenants’ rights programs in a predominately black public housing project. He remained in that position for three years.

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4 Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 133-41.
In the course of his work, Obama became aware of the importance of churches in the African-American community. He made a point of getting acquainted with many of Chicago’s black ministers, including Jeremiah Wright, the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ. He joined Wright’s church, and Wright became his minister and sometime advisor. Being a church member had the practical effect of making Obama a more effective community organizer, but it also helped satisfy the growing spiritual needs that had led him to read philosophy and theology. Eventually, he concluded that he would be better able to serve the population with which he had been working if he became an attorney. He was accepted by Harvard Law School, which he entered in the fall of 1988. Before the start of the academic year, he acted on his long-standing interest in better understanding his paternal roots and spent five weeks in Kenya, becoming acquainted with members of his father’s family.

Obama proved to be an outstanding law student. In his second year at Harvard, he was elected president (editor in chief) of the *Harvard Law Review*. Because he was the first African American to head that prestigious journal, his selection was widely reported in the media. One result of this attention was a contract for a book that was published in 1995 as *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.

Obama graduated from Harvard magna cum laude in 1991 and returned to Chicago, where he joined a law firm that specialized in civil rights litigation and neighborhood economic development, taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago, and directed a project that registered large numbers of African Americans to vote. In 1992, he married Michelle Robinson, a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, whose family is rooted in Chicago’s African-American community.

**Political Ascent**

In 1996, a state senate seat in Chicago’s South Side became vacant when Alice Palmer resigned to run for the U.S. House of Representatives. Obama announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination in her former district, established a campaign organization, and began to raise funds. (The Democratic nomination is tantamount to election in Chicago.) Palmer was defeated in her House race and let it be known that she wanted to return to the state senate. A number of influential Chicago Democrats urged Obama to make way for her, but he refused. Instead, he authorized his aides to scrutinize the signatures on the petitions to be listed on the

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primary election ballot filed by Palmer and his other opponents. All of his opponents were disqualified because they had too few petitions with valid signatures to appear on the ballot. Obama therefore ran unopposed for the state legislature. He had alienated Palmer and some of her supporters, but his career as an elected official had begun.

Obama served in the Illinois legislature from 1997 to 2004. He was initially viewed with skepticism by his colleagues because of his Ivy League credentials and what biographer David Mendel describes as the “policy-heavy and overly intellectual” content of his speeches. However, he soon mastered the politics of Springfield, even learning to play poker and golf in order to be in the casual settings in which political alliances were formed. Obama also became a protégé of Senate Democratic leader Emil Jones and established bonds with lawmakers from outside his district, building statewide ties.

Obama was limited in what he could accomplish in the legislature until 2003, because it was under Republican control. Then the Democrats came into power. Emil Jones became the president of the Senate and used his position to help Obama compile a record of achievements. Obama played a central part in the passage of laws that provided tax credits for low-income workers, increased the level of child care subsidies, and tightened the ethical standards for public officials. His signature law mandated the videotaping of police interrogations, thus ending the practice of coercing confessions. The measure passed unanimously. To win that level of support, Obama negotiated with the governor and lawmakers of both parties and also won support from representatives of the police, pointing out that the measure was in the interest of effective law enforcement.

Serving at the state level did not satisfy Obama’s soaring ambitions. In January of 2003, he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. His first hurdle was the March 2004 Democratic primary. In the weeks leading up to the primary, Obama surged to the head of a large field of candidates with the help of blizzard of television advertising, pointing out that he had been endorsed by a number of major labor unions and newspapers as well as several prominent Illinois Democrats. He won the nomination with more votes than all the other candidates combined.

Between the time Obama won the Senate nomination and the general election, there was a development that transformed his political career. He was invited to give the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in late July. Obama wrote a speech that focused on the significance of his own actions.

7 David Mendell, *Obama*, 122.
multicultural background for American politics. In it, he set forth what has been described as his “post-racial, post-partisan” political stance that plays down such social distinctions as race and stresses the ties that unite all Americans. As he put it in his address, “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.”

Obama’s presentation electrified the convention, catapulting him to the national political stage. He entered the convention hall as a little-known state official and left it as a political luminary. One result was that Dreams from My Father was reprinted and became a best seller. Another was that Obama was in great demand as a speaker, drawing audiences that responded to him with the fervor usually reserved for entertainment celebrities. It was a near certainty that the now nationally acclaimed Obama would win the general election. The magnitude of his victory was increased when a personal scandal forced his Republican opponent to drop out. The last-minute GOP substitute was the perennial candidate for public office, Alan Keyes, whose deeply conservative message was poorly suited to the state’s electorate. Obama was elected with 70 percent of the vote—the record for an Illinois statewide election.

Obama and his aides adopted a phased strategy for his initiation into the Senate. According to his chief of staff, he first sought to demonstrate “that he was serious about being a senator for Illinois.” His early initiatives therefore related to such matters as securing appropriations for his state. Next, he worked to establish that he was a hard-working member of the Senate and was available to advance his party’s agenda. Only then did he concentrate on building his national reputation, spelling out his vision for the future in a wide variety of forums. During his brief time on Capitol Hill, Obama contributed to the passage of legislation dealing with arms control, regulation of lobbying, prevention of electoral fraud, and care for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To the White House

Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois, using the building in which Abraham Lincoln delivered his 1885 house-divided address as a backdrop. He was one of three front-runners for the Democratic nomination. The others were New York senator and former first lady, Hillary Clinton, and former North Carolina senator and 2004 vice presidential candidate, John Edwards. Clinton was widely viewed as the likely

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nominee. She had near-universal name recognition and the backing of many of the nation’s most prominent Democratic leaders. Edwards took a populist tack, stressing that he was the son of a mill worker. Obama’s strengths included the skill, organization, and discipline of his campaign staff and the extraordinary enthusiasm of his supporters. It also helped that he was an early opponent of the war in Iraq, whereas both Clinton and Edwards had voted for the congressional resolution authorizing the president to use force in that nation.

The race for the nomination officially began on January 3, 2008, with the Iowa caucuses. Obama’s strategy had been to get his campaign off to a strong start by doing well in that bellwether state. He achieved his goal, coming in first with 38 percent of the vote. Edwards was second with 30 percent. Clinton trailed with 29 percent. However, she turned the tables by winning in New Hampshire on January 8. By the time of the Super Tuesday primaries and caucuses early in February, Edwards had done so poorly that he suspended his campaign, and Obama had a modest lead over Clinton.

In March, there was a disclosure that threatened to derail Obama’s candidacy. ABC News publicized excerpts from angry sermons given by Obama’s minister, Jeremiah Wright. In one of them, Wright seemed to be justifying the September 11, 2001, bombing of the World Trade Center on the grounds that the United States had committed such crimes as bombing Japan with nuclear weapons in World War II. In another, he recited a litany of alleged misconduct by the American government and said that rather than singing “God Bless America,” his parishioners should sing “God Damn America.”

Obama’s response was to compose a closely reasoned speech on race relations in the United States from the framing of the Constitution to the present. He reiterated his commitment to bringing Americans of all colors and creeds together and declared that he disagreed with Wright’s “divisive” statements, adding that he expected Wright to continue to be his pastor. With his characteristic attention to symbolism, Obama delivered the address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, not far from Independence Hall.*

Despite the Jeremiah Wright affair, Obama maintained his lead over Clinton, steadily approaching the point at which his delegate margin would make him unbeatable. He was helped by his campaign’s innovative use of the internet to mobilize supporters and raise funds, as well as its pursuit of delegates in the states in which delegates are selected in caucuses, which the Clinton forces tended to ignore. The contest continued until early June when Clinton conceded. Obama’s Republican opponent, Senator John McCain of Arizona, in contrast, had become his party’s presumptive nominee three months earlier.

*Wright persisted in making such statements, and Obama finally broke with him.
It proved to be to Obama’s advantage that the Democratic nominating process continued for so long. Its duration gave the Obama organization time to build a network of experienced campaign workers and made Obama more newsworthy than McCain for an extended period of time. In August, the presidential candidates selected their vice presidential running-mates. Obama’s was the six-term Delaware senator, Joseph Biden, and McCain’s was the Alaska governor, Sarah Palin. Neither appears to have had a decisive effect on the election.

Two matters were critically important—the unpopularity of President Bush and the severe economic downturn that was enveloping the nation. Such matters typically hurt the candidate of the party holding the White House, and that was true for McCain, who attempted with limited success to distance himself from Bush. In the final weeks of the campaign, Obama maintained his lead, both nationally and in many of the crucial battleground states. He was elected with 53 percent of the popular vote and 365 electoral votes to McCain’s 173.

Obama went on to preside over a transition to the presidency that was conspicuous for the speed with which he named his appointees and their strong qualifications. Obama was strikingly successful in commanding public attention during the transition with televised events in which he introduced his appointees and fielded questions about the policy areas over which they were to preside. His actions played well. A month after his election with 53 percent of the vote, the Gallup Poll found that 78 percent of the public approved of his conduct during the transition.\(^{10}\)

**Leadership Qualities**

*Public Communication.* As is evident from the 2004 rhetorical tour de force that put him on the political map, Obama is a gifted public communicator. His strength derives in part from his oratorical gifts and in part from his message. Obama draws on his aides to refine and polish his addresses, but he is his own principal speechwriter. His opponents in the 2008 primary and general elections acknowledged his eloquence but attempted to turn it against him by claiming that there was little substance behind his talk. After his election, however, Obama was all substance, setting his program forth in detail. Little more was heard of the claim that his rhetoric was empty.

*Organizational Capacity.* It has been argued that senators make poor executives, because they lack the experience of presiding over large organizations. The previous member of the Senate to win the presidency, John F. Kennedy,

\(^{10}\) voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/12/02/gallup_americans_give_obama_tr.html
resembled Obama in his quick mind and the high qualifications of his associates. But that did not prevent him from signing off on the famously ill-advised Bay of Pigs fiasco in the opening months of his presidency. Obama’s remarks when he introduced his national security team indicate that he is aware of the danger of making decisions that have not been rigorously debated. It was no accident that he had chosen a team whose members had strong views, he explained:

I think that’s how the best decisions are made. One of the dangers in a White House, based on my reading of history, is that you get wrapped up in groupthink and everybody agrees with everything and there’s no discussion and there are no dissenting views. So I’m going to be welcoming a vigorous debate inside the White House. But understand, I will be setting policy as president. I will be responsible for the vision that this team carries out, and I expect them to implement that vision once decisions are made.11

**Political Skill.** Obama’s prepresidential record shows ample evidence of his political skill. His time in the Illinois legislature is particularly instructive because it is his most sustained political experience. As we have seen, he was quick to learn the tactics needed to become an influential player in the state capital, forming political alliances on the golf course and at the poker table, as well as in official settings. His political skill was also evident in the bonds he forged with legislators outside of Chicago and with Senate Democratic leader, Emil Jones, both of which helped him position himself to run for the U.S. Senate.

**Policy Vision.** Obama’s vision of political inclusiveness is encapsulated in his address to the 2004 Democratic Convention. It has been influenced by his effort to resolve the seeming contradictions in what he has described as his “complicated” upbringing. Many of Obama’s Republican opponents argued that this was an empty claim, pointing to his liberal voting record in the Senate. Once he became president-elect, however, Obama acted on his vision, taking counsel not only from his political allies but also from former opponents. Meanwhile, he exhibited the more concrete side of his political world view, unfolding the policies his administration would be advancing. As befits a leader who seeks to enlist support across the political spectrum, Obama policies are less influenced by

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11 Obama made this statement in response to a reporter’s question following his December 1, 2008, announcement of his national security team. The term *groupthink* was coined by the social psychologist Irving Janis to refer to a tendency of members of congenial advisory groups to accept flawed policies out of a reluctance to be disagreeable to their associates. Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policies and Fiascos* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).
abstract doctrine than by a pragmatic effort to devise workable, politically feasible policies.

**Cognitive Style.** Obama was widely recognized for his intelligence and open-mindedness when he was at Harvard, where he was elected to preside over the nation's most prestigious law journal. During his time as lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, his students were fascinated by his practice of illuminating issues from contrasting points of view. As these examples indicate, Obama's cognitive style is marked by intelligence, analytic detachment, and a capacity for complex thinking. This style is evident in the way he conducts policy meetings, which is to begin by posing the questions he wants answered, go on to elicit the views of the participants, and conclude by summarizing what he has taken from meeting and how that may affect his actions.

**Emotional Intelligence.** “I don’t get too high when things are going well and I don’t get too low when things are going tough,” Obama has remarked. The Washington Post's Joel Achenbach argues that Obama's even temperament was an asset in the 2008 campaign. “He has had spectacular moments,” Achenbach comments, "but he also showed an uncanny knack for avoiding mistakes His opponents sneered that Obama has no experience, but by the end of his campaign he didn’t look green at all. He seemed fully in command of his own campaign and his own emotions.” That, as we have seen, was not always the case. As a young man, Obama was unsettled in his racial identity and indulged in drugs and alcohol. Eventually, however, he came to terms with his life experience and built on it to forge his political philosophy of inclusiveness. The Barrack Obama of today may be the rare political leader who has a first-rate temperament and a first-rate mind.

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